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ABSTRACT

A comprehensive composition course for the college level should include the strengthening of cognitive skills, language skills, social organization, and language patterns. The subjects which students are asked to read and write about should be multi-cultural in nature so that students learn more about other cultures while they analyze their own cultural experiences. Many constraints limit the professor's ability to have such a well rounded curriculum. In a composition course at the University of California at Irvine the constraints are the following: (1) the large number of students in the class; (2) the commitment to finish the course in a ten-week quarter; (3) the placement of the course in the English Department, where the faculty has narrow views about what constitutes a good composition course; (4) staff members who are mostly Anglo and have little knowledge of multi-ethnic literature; (5) the bias of publishers against including some ethnic groups but not others, like Asian Americans and American Indians; (6) the cost of books; and (7) student resistance to all or part of the multi-cultural approach. The solutions to these problems may be that instructors of these courses must develop and evaluate their work outside of the mainstream of existing departments, and students must be encouraged to validate their own cultural experiences as well as those of other groups. (VM)

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Using Multi-Ethnic Literature in the Composition Classroom: Overcoming the Obstacles

The Obstacles to "Minority Literature": Antipathies and Ignorance

We seldom use the word "minority" to describe some of our students--or the literature they read--here at the University of California, Irvine, since 54% of our entering freshmen are Asian, Hispanic, Black, Native American or "Other." I see many of these students as director of the first of the three introductory composition courses in which most of these 4000 students must enroll during their freshman year. The course I direct is a uniform one, taught over the course of the year by over 100 TAs and lecturers who share a common syllabus, use the same texts and give the same assignments. As administrator, I design the course, select the texts, write those assignments, and train the staff. I mention these facts first because they affect the ways multi-ethnic literature can and cannot be used in the composition classroom, but also because some of you may be unaware of the factors an entire PROGRAM must consider if it seeks to modify its writing program. My main goal this morning is to send you back to your own programs and departments with a new sympathy--and perhaps your support--for the efforts of my counterpart on your own campus.

I am a new member of MELUS. I come not because I have much to share, but, as I am about to reveal, because I have much to LEARN. I was a graduate student at UCI, and when I returned to direct Writing 39A after six years in Ann Arbor, I discovered the campus had changed. As I looked over the

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composition program, I observed that it too was going to have to change if we were to serve these diverse students. Faced with this tremendous cultural plurality, I thought it important to build a program based on sound theories about cognitive skills, language acquisition, social organization, and even rhetorical patterns characteristic of different languages. I also thought it important to adopt a multi-cultural curriculum in which students would read about the experiences of numerous cultures and write about those expressions, analyzing their own cultural development in light of their broadened understandings of the similarities and diversities of our human conditions.

Along the way, however, I encountered some obstacles arising primarily from the institution, from the industries producing our materials, and from the students themselves. While I can offer some solutions, I am here in part to discover still others from your own teaching experiences.

Institutional constraints arise from the nature of the composition program currently in place. What a curriculum can introduce may be limited by the number of students the program serves, the objectives of the university or, in the case of California's Subject A requirement, the system-wide mandates; the course I direct satisfies a state requirement and hence bears obligations to the other UC schools and shares a system-wide placement exam for entrance. Further, institutions have articulation agreements that attempt to establish parity in the kinds of reading and writing experiences students have in various schools. Finally, the ambitions of any composition director or staff are reined in by the length of time students remain in the program; we are committed to a developmental, sequential program within a ten-week quarter.

In addition to these rather formidable bureaucratic constraints, English faculty whose departments house most composition programs construct other barriers. Usually trained in the belle lettres traditions, ladder faculty may be very enlightened about their own disciplines but rather rigid in their notions about composition: composition should be as it was in their day, limited to the reading and writing about "Great Western thought, great books." Such an attitude clearly informs such texts as A World of Ideas: Essential Readings of College Students (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986, 707pp.) While few ladder faculty teach or supervise writing programs, even those who do often seek to foist upon composition courses their conservative views about what is apt and important reading for freshmen writers. These holders--these inventors--of the canon often reflect views predicated on political rather than pedagogical considerations.

Staff members for composition programs raise other dilemmas: if the program is housed in the English Departments, staff members are predominately Anglo. What is multi-ethnic literature to them? If they are novice teachers, particularly teaching assistants, they see the inclusion of such material as a threat to their developing methodologies when we ask them to teach something often very foreign to their experience or even to their manipulation. "Do we have to?" they ask. If they are Anglos, they feel presumptuous about presenting material about another culture beyond their ken. Of course as director I try to allay these fears; often they know more than their students are supposed to have experienced.

Yet if these institutional obstacles can be overcome, ignored or dismantled, we still face the frustrations designing a curriculum around available materials. Commercial presses pose several problems. First, ethnic

publications and college texts coming from major publishers are usually produced by different divisions within that house and are served by separate publicity or sales organizations making it hard for those of us without special expertise in these fields to discover what actually is available. While much of the best material for our use comes from small presses, regrettably they often cannot guarantee uninterrupted supply for up to three years.

Second, editorial selections and decisions for the major texts, made on the east coast, effect the materials we can use. The elusive "they" (I do not use that passive voice construction lightly) seem to believe "ethnic" is "black" and "Hispanic or Latino" is "Puerto Rican." Asian-American literature is unknown to them, and they argue there isn't an audience for it anyway. As for Native American literature? "Oh yes, we are going to try to have some in our next edition." Our west coast book representatives argue that they have pled our case at the home office to no avail: thus our anthologies continue to reflect narrowly circumscribed "ethnic" groups and ignore the experiences of entire populations in our American culture. Those of us who have spoken to authors of such anthologies continue to be dismayed by both their ignorance of and hostility to our professed need.

Finally, the cost of books also deserves our consideration. How costly <u>is</u> a book purchased in combination with rhetorics and/or handbooks for the course? How many works will insure adequate representation? Will the book continue to be available, or will it be out of print next fall? How long a "life" will a text have before it will need to be replaced? Is it scheduled for revision before our preferred three year "life" has elapsed? Will our

major adoption justify a steady supply of desk copies when new instructors enter our program in subsequent terms?

These questions all presuppose using a text rather than duplicating copyrighted material. While providing hand-outs may be easier to do within the privacy of an individual classroom and justifiable on grounds of scholastic activity and research, it is an impractical solution for a course with upwards of 55 sections. Legal questions aside, such a practice raises moral issues for me: it deprives the writers of their just recompense. The argument then becomes, "Isn't some exposure better than none?" Personally, I'd rather lobby. I'd rather advocate unifying our voices and collectively expressing our needs, refusing to buy books, and explaining to national editors why we are offended by the selection they offer. It is a power I believe I must exercise as a director in one of the largest, single adoption composition programs on the west coast. But my voice will be made more meaningful if your own is added to it until we have a chorus of dissatisfied consumers. Certainly our concerted efforts can reap benefits.

The third major obstacle I have encountered in our attempts to institute a multi-ethnic program here is built by the very students we serve. Let me address three categories of students since the reason for their resistance comes from different sources. What follows is the grossest of generalizations, and I probably don't need to remind you that any such grouping is simultaneously true and untrue in its very attempt to categorize such variety; the generalizations only permit us to look at the kinds of resistance likely to emerge in a program such as ours.

The first student group is the recent Immigrant/Refugee population--primarily from the Pacific Rim nations. Conventionally these students want to become invisible citizens as soon as possible. In some instances, they have genuine horrors to forget. Manifesting a kind of "shame" that most immigrant populations first demonstrate, they don't want to be reminded about the differences among our cultures, and want to appear as much like their yuppie Anglo counterparts as possible. In addition to ignoring their heritage, they create other impediments because they may continue to harbor cultural, geographical, and historical antipathies for other Asians in the classroom. They are justifiably resistent to being "lumped" or "labeled" in any way--even as this very paper does so. Such "lumping" does, however, allow us to anticipate learning or linguistic difficulties students will face and to train my staff, developing their sensitivity to these students in order to recognize--and decode--the signs of discomfort their students exhibit.

In particular, Southeast Asians have additional causes to resist representative literature: (1) Their parents and family members often will not talk about experiences in their native country (particularly true with some Vietnamese families who refuse to talk about the war); thus they are ignorant of even basic historical facts. That becomes a further source of embarrassment for them when they encounter their historically accurate literature or are asked questions by innocent peers who themselves couldn't answer questions about America's immediate national past. (2) Their immigration at 10, 11, 12 has left them without a sense of themselves in either culture; they may speak neither language well and are unable to read or write in their native language. To be asked to write about their experiences as a member of an ethnic population may be very difficult because they must

rely on memory and have seldom been asked to articulate their experiences or analyze similarities between their own and those of the writers whose work they read.

UCI's Black students frequently betray a genuine lack of information about their cultural heritage. In this instance, the staff on this campus probably does know more about the "black experience" than many of the students, though both groups know less than the Black students I encountered in Detroit and at The University of Michigan. UCI's Black students know little about the struggle of the 60's--it is "just something Mom and Dad talk about." Their sense of "heritage" is limited to the entertainment industry and the few black figures they studied during "Black History Month"; in short, they lack awareness of whatever rich cultural differences may exist. Black students here come from predominately middle and upper-middle class families. They participate in few distinctively ethnic customs, and here in Southern California may not enjoy the extended families that other locales foster. They have often been racially isolated in the prep schools they attended, deny that they have ever personally been the target of racism, and, as one of my students confessed, spend "the freshman year adjusting to what it is to be Black." Here on this campus they feel particularly isolated because of their too-small number and are often at odds with other ethnic groups. But on the whole, their experience with what yesterday Katharine Newman called the "common culture" renders their cultural experiences very similar to that of their Caucasian counterparts. As a result, they simultaneously embrace and distance themselves from the black writers we read: they are baffled by Maya Angelou's "Graduation," but intrigued by Langston Hughes' "Theme for English B."

Hispanic students, on the other hand, infrequently come from middle class families; most are the first generation of their family to come to college. They are seldom well-read but are intensely proud and eager to learn. Of all the ethnic populations, they most willingly share their experiences, and particularly their feelings. Their own close family ties make them sympathetic readers of students and professionals who write of their ethnic experiences.

Caucasian students reflect a wide socio-economic range. As a group, the 18-year old freshmen are prone to gross generalization, unwarranted assumptions, and prejudices often adopted whole-cloth from parents. They think that "boat people" are folks who have just returned in their yacht from a trip to Baja; they are frighteningly ignorant of social and political realities and initially resist any critical examination of their own experience though they are generally curious about the experiences of others. Occasionally they chafe against the multi-ethnic readings. But the visible diversity of their composition classroom infuses such study with new urgency on their part. The few returning students who come to UCI are already aware of "differences" and are hence much more sensitive to diversity than the younger Caucasians.

The Solutions: Courage and Stealth

The solutions, in part, come from our courage. As directors of composition programs, we use our marginal status. Being on the fringe of institutional hierarchy (and hence institutional power) has its advantages since members of the academy often leave us alone and think us odd anyway.

That permits me--maybe compels me--to be political. I think the term "dominant culture" does indeed describe what this culture attempts to do to its own sub-cultures, whether that domination occurs in the more benign liberal humanism that influences textbooks in the belle lettres tradition, or in the more direct, reactionary xenophobic politics surrounding California's Proposition 63, the English Only proposal. Yet unlike what you can do in your literature class, my staff must prepare student writers to perform in that dominant culture, and in the sub-culture called academia. Our course makes those activities explicitly political acts--with no apologies. We predicate our course on an examination of cultural experiences and expectations set within a dominating socio-political environment, evaluated by its standards and subject to its consequences.

Secondly, within that institutional setting, I aim to empower students politically by designing a program capitalizing on what they already know about language, families, rites of passage, stereotypes, the media. As these student/citizens further share classroom experiences of reading writing and discussion, they formulate new communities expressly built on "unity in diversity." Such a program also underscores their individual cognitive strengths. For example, we exploit students' individual tendencies to order their world by patterns of inductive and deductive thought; our assignments privilege first one and then another mode of thought so students can model those cognitive behaviors for others in the class. This practice validates diversity in something as fundamental as the method of inquiry; similar diversity is celebrated in the various strategies students identify as useful to them in the writing process.

The second institutional problem, the hostility--or worse yet, indifference--of faculty toward a multi-ethnic curriculum, is often best countered by simply inviting them into classroom. There the ethnic mix of our freshman composition classes is in striking contrast to their predominately Anglo upper-class humanities courses. Such invitations also promote discussions about textbooks, and foster shared paper assignments and syllabi. By expanding their awareness of available materials and the assumptions about literature, we simultaneously invite them to reexamine the canon as it is represented in their own classrooms.

This political importance of these activities is immediately apparent to the composition staff; and they trust that the multi-ethnic curriculum has intellectual and social importance too. If I provide staff with adequate training and on-going inservices, supplemental readings, biographies, and information about authors and the contexts in which they wrote, they feel more confident about teaching this material. They are emboldened to raise new issues in the texts, and continually promote a critical examination of anyone's claim to possess the "truth" about experience. They also have fun.

I have already suggested that by unifying our lobbying efforts to secure the books we so desperately need we counter the obstacle of available materials. But we also need to produce our own anthologies and to engage in shameless self-promotion so that we learn what has worked in similarly organized courses or what we have published. We need to generate and share bibliographies.

For our resistent students, we must continue to provide role models of professional writers who have learned to use and accommodate Standard Written English. We need too to bring in other models from other disciplines. I

wish we were at a stage where identifying ethnic or racial identity were unnecessary--where we did not, as we still do in some texts, encounter ethnic writers clumped together under to sobriquet of "Other Voices." I wish I could introduce a writer without having to note, "So-and-so, a famous BLACK sociologist . . . ." I wish it didn't matter, and in a face-to-face encounter, it wouldn't. But students often cannot identify the ethnicity of writers simply by their surname, and the printed text does not give the visual cues they would have in meeting the author personally. It is important for these young writers, often second language learners, to have those role models identified for them, to see that those writers of diverse ethnic experience have mastered the jargon appropriate for their discipline, that they have learned to use the codes expected of them. The message is clear to the students: what those writers can do, we can do if we so choose.

Multi-cultural composition programs also validate students' experiences by affirming that those experiences matter---to them, and to us. We don't want to erase from social consciousness the central American refugee's flight or the Southeast Asian's encounter with pirates. It now becomes part of our collective social heritage and is made permanent by fixing it on the page they read or write. It is important for the classroom community to understand what is unique about individual experiences, and simultaneously, what is common to all human interchange.